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XVIII

FAIRS AND GATHERINGS

THE Irish countryman enjoys nothing so much as 'a gathering' of people, and when he is forced to leave his native land he does not willingly settle down away from large urban centres. At home a crowd goes to his head like poteen. The daily routine of life on an isolated farm presents him with few opportunities for seeing people from outside his immediate neighbourhood, and on fine summer evenings his favourite pastime is to throw himself against a roadside ditch with a knot of companions and watch the passers-by. That the remarkably large attendances at rural churches and chapels owe something to the social needs of a scattered population is suggested by the phrase, applied to someone who arrives late at chapel: 'he missed the mass but hit the gathering'—he had something worth while for his trouble. In the Irish laws the freeman's rights of assembly were carefully defined: there were assemblies for transacting legal business (the oireacht), and others for commerce and games (the aenach) which came to be called fairs. With the coming of Christianity the traditional gatherings at sacred sites were transmuted into patterns (pardons), at which the new religion was quickened by practices of the elder faiths. In fact most gatherings served more than one purpose. The secret assemblies of Roman Catholics at 'mass rocks' in penal days no doubt also provided opportunities for social and commercial dealings, and the 'sacrament Sabbaths' of Presbyterian Ulster were great gatherings having something of the nature of fairs. Tents and booths were erected for the occasion, and indeed they were popularly known as 'holy fairs'.

Although the fair has lost something of its former significance in Northern Ireland, thanks to Government marketing schemes

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and purchasing boards, it is still a powerful commercial and social force in the rest of Ireland. In fact the numbers of fairs have increased with the post-famine dominance of the cattle trade, though they have tended to be concentrated in fewer centres as many small fair-towns have been by-passed by improved means of communication. On the other hand the weekly markets have declined or disappeared, their place taken by shops which typically handle drinks as well as groceries, clothing as well as hardware. Thus the fair has retained and even strengthened its magnetic hold on the countryfolk, and though many of its subsidiary functions have been taken over by institutions of more recent origin, the fair itself retains a pagan aura. There is a widespread belief, by no means confined to Ireland, that fair days are always rainy days. This belief may well be justified by climatic averages, but I have heard it explained as a consequence of the lies and profanity, the fights and pagan ways of the fair. Many an ancient fair has become extinct, no doubt because it no longer fulfilled its economic functions, but the explanation usually given is that it was abandoned 'on account of the fighting'.

In Europe, north of the Alpine mountains, the fair as a means of exchange and social intercourse is an institution older than the town, and older far than Christianity. The periodic assemblies of early Celtic Ireland served as temporary towns, and it was probably these sites which Ptolemy marked as cities on his map of the second century A.D. They were held on hill-tops hallowed by an antiquity which archaeology has in some instances traced back to the Bronze Age, and the regions which they served were, we have suggested, already taking shape in the late Neolithic period. Ireland has a number of large enclosures of Neolithic date analogous to Windmill Hill in Wiltshire, which apparently functioned as seasonal meeting places where stock was rounded-up and sorted. An enclosure of rather different type but of similar age—the Giant's Ring near Belfast—was the scene of horse-racing down to recent centuries. On the cairn-crowned Cave Hill, too, overlooking Belfast, crowds used to assemble on Easter Monday 'in accordance with immemorial usage'.[1] We may see in the 'parles

[1] J. B. Doyle, *Tours in Ulster* (1855), 102.

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upon hills', which the Dublin government found so obnoxious in the sixteenth century, the persistent efforts of the Irish to maintain their ancient rights and customs of public assembly. In the Anglo-Norman period and again during the plantations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries towns were deliberately established with the intention of bringing 'civilized ways of living to the wild Irish'. Many of them are characterized by a wide street or square—the 'diamond' in Northern Ireland—where fairs and other gatherings could be dominated and controlled from a castle which overlooked it. These urban settlements were known to the Irish, whose native 'towns' were rarely anything more than disorderly clachans, as 'street towns'. They are found scattered at fairly regular intervals all through the countryside, usually at some river crossing or hill gap where routeways meet. Some of them, well-placed in good fertile country, have expanded, while others have decayed or remained mere villages. Often one will find not far away the old Fair Hill from which the fair was attracted as the facilities of the town outweighed the traditional pull of the inconvenient hill-top. But for long the Irish kept to their own fairs which continued, according to an Act of 1431, to 'take great customs and profits to the depression of the boroughs and the trading towns'.[1] The old assembly places are not entirely forgotten, and it often happened that they were visited for games and horse-racing long after they had lost their function as places of commerce. They are celebrated in local ballads and their sites can still be traced by the grassy mounds which are the remains of booths and cattle pens. The lost fairs of Ireland deserve a study such as is being made of the lost villages of England, but the chief sources for such a study, in the absence of records, must lie in field work and the fast-fading memories of the countryside.

The fairs were formerly organized in a recognized sequence of goods and livestock, terminating in sports and horse-racing—and not infrequently in bloodshed. Several of them achieved a notoriety which made their names a byword, and among them none was more notorious, owing partly no doubt to its proximity to Dublin, than Donnybrook Fair. The Parliamentary Gazetteer of 1845 forgets its sober purpose in thus describing

[1] T. W. Freeman, *Ireland*, 95.

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443 it: 'During the week, beginning on the 26th August, is held
543 the notorious Donnybrook Fair, professedly for the sale of
578 horses and black cattle, but really for vulgar dissipation, and
786 formerly for criminal outrage and the most revolting debauchery. It was for generations a perfect prodigy of moral horrors —a concentration of disgrace upon, not Ireland alone, but civilized Europe. It far surpassed all other fairs in the multitude and grossness of its disgusting incidents of vice; and, in general, it exhibited such continuous scenes of riot, bloodshed, debauchery and brutality, as only the coarsest taste and the most hardened heart could witness without painful emotion.' This was by day; 'the orgies of the night may be better imagined than described'. An anonymous writer is quoted as saying: 'We venture to say that there is more misery and madness, devilment and debauchery, than could be found crowded into an equal space of ground in any other part of this our globe, during five times the same space, which is spent at Donnybrook, in one given year'. The *Gazetteer* then recovers itself and offers excuses for 'describing what ought never to have been described'. One regrets rather that the compiler was so overcome by horror as to forget his statistical duties.

543 The absence of moral restraint which led to extremes of
527 lawlessness at Donnybrook and elsewhere was a normal and
443 characteristic accompaniment of these periodic folk-gatherings.
[786] Such moral holidays are a feature of many societies which have not been greatly influenced by urban ways and values. Their purpose appears to be cathartic, but that there is a lingering fertility magic underlying the excitement is suggested by such strange rituals as those which mark the 'Puck Fair and Pattern' of Kilorglin at the head of Dingle Bay in Co. Kerry. The fair is unfortunately not mentioned in the *Parliamentary Gazetteer*, though the village of Kilorglin is described as 'an unprosperous, sequestered, and almost squalid seat of population; and appears to have acquired marvellously little profit from the advantageousness of its position for both inland and seaward trade'. Puck Fair, held every August, is the great event of the year in West Kerry, and lasts three days. 10th August is 'Gathering Day', the 11th is 'Fair Day', and the 12th 'Scattering Day', terms which have no doubt been handed down from days when

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'the order of the fair' was prescribed and the business lasted several days. On the evening of Gathering Day a procession assembles at the bridge and makes its way to the central square carrying (nowadays in a large cage mounted on a lorry) a billy-goat bedecked with ribbons. He is chained by the horns on a high platform erected for the purpose and, supplied with a liberal stock of cabbages, he presides over the fair. Tradition says that the goat used to stand, 'garlanded by greenery' on the old castle which was erected here by the Geraldines in the thirteenth century. The business of the fair is the sale of live-stock, and as with many another large fair it is a traditional gathering place for the tinkers who in Ireland take the place of the gypsies. On the evening of Scattering Day the Puck is borne triumphantly back to the bridge. The popular explanation of the custom is that it commemorates an occasion when the noise of goats warned the Irish of advancing English forces, but it is more reasonable to see Puck as a symbol of fertility and good luck. 12th August is Old Lammas, and Lammas Day, the 1st August, was known to the Irish as 'Lewy's Fair', in memory of a pre-Christian deity. This season of high summer has many associations with the pastoral freedom of the hills, with young people and with dancing and courting. There are traditions of other Puck Fairs in the south of Ireland, and there were certain fairs at which a white horse was paraded through the assembled crowds and then tied up to preside over the proceedings.

Another celebrated gathering place was the great fair of Ballinasloe, which brought such fame to this Galway town that the *Gazetteer* describes it as 'the cynosure of much the larger part of the western province of Ireland', so prosperous that even its poorer quarters, 'a segregation of lanes, and houses, and cabins, aggregately repulsive', were yet 'greatly less haggard than what constitutes the whole of many a third or second rate town in Ireland'. The fair was held from the 5th to the 9th of October, and during the first half of the nineteenth century the average numbers of sheep and cattle offered for sale were respectively 90,000 and 12,000. Ballinasloe Fair served the west of Ireland in much the same way as the great trysts of Crieff and Falkirk served the Scottish Highlands in the days of

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the famous cattle droves.[1] The town lies on one of the sinuous gravel ridges (eskers) which lead eastwards from the limestone grazing grounds of east Galway to the crossing of the Shannon and then thread their way through a maze of bogs to reach the headwaters of the Irish Sea rivers. The eskers provide dry footing for roads some of which are routeways of great antiquity, and down to the coming of railways they served as drove roads along which cattle and sheep were taken to the fattening pastures and markets of the eastern lowlands. The date of the great fair of Ballinasloe, in early October, corresponds with that of the largest trysts at Crieff and Falkirk, and would have allowed time for the movement of livestock to eastern Ireland or to the English fairs by All-Hallows or Martinmas.

No study of the Irish drove roads has been made as for those of Scotland and Wales, but it seems probable that the movement of livestock along routes from west to east has been developing since the Middle Ages, when its logical outcome was the export trade in hides from the Irish Sea ports. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries exports largely took the form of salt beef and butter, but since the early nineteenth century the store cattle trade has been so dominant that it has latterly accounted for half the total export trade of southern Ireland. It involves a movement of cattle not only from west to east but from small farms to large, and from scanty grazings to the lush fattening pastures of Meath or the English lowlands. Apart from small strings of beasts on their way to local fairs, the cattle droves are today most in evidence in the crowded dockside streets of the ports where they are herded on to the cross-channel boats, but until quite recently donkeys and goats purchased at fairs in the west still travelled to the ports on the hoof. The drover-dealers who accompanied them were colourful characters whose experience stood them in good stead in the wider world. These dealers in the unwanted residues of the countryside—in rags and scrap as well as asses and goats—have often set up as rag-and-scrap merchants in the large towns along their routes from Belfast and Dublin to the English fairs, and one of them became Lord Mayor of a Scottish city. Others made big money as pedlars of cloth in America or Australia. Most of these 'pahvees',

[1] A. R. B. Haldane, *The Drove Roads of Scotland.*

[i.e., Ballinasloe.–Analyst]

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as they are called, were born in the mountain country of Slieve Gullion in Co. Armagh, adjoining the rich plains of the Pale where their ancestors sharpened their wits on the English settlers. Many stories are told of the tricks by which 'the goatmen' disposed of their animals before they reached their goal at Barnet Fair, of billy-goats sold to the innocent English as good milkers or as an infallible means of keeping a garden free of weeds. 'Every guy who comes here selling cloth', said a Canadian rancher, 'tells me he is from Slieve Gullion. It must be some city.'

Although the export of live cattle from Ireland was prohibited, in the interests of British farming, through most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the short sea-crossings from north-east Ireland enabled dealers to ship them to southern Scotland. The embargo was lifted in 1765, and by the early nineteenth century many thousands of cattle were reaching Portpatrick and being driven to the fairs at Dumfries and Carlisle, and farther afield to Barnet in Hertfordshire and St. Faith's near Norwich. Many Irish harvesters and other summer migrants followed the trails trodden by Irish cattle and their drovers, but after 1830, with the coming of the steamship, Glasgow, the Mersey and Holyhead became, as they remain, the chief points of entry for both animals and men.

Before the agrarian revolution and the import of feeding stuffs made it possible to keep stock through the winter, the months of October and November were critical for the farmer, who had to dispose of many of his animals at this time. The trade is now better distributed through the year, but although monthly fairs have become general since the famine, the sales vary a good deal from month to month, and the important fairs still fall at the turning points of the pastoral year, particularly in May and November. The spring fairs of February and March and the Lammas fairs of July and August were to a large extent concerned respectively with horses and with sheep and wool, but those of May and November were the great cattle fairs and also the hiring fairs. We are reminded that the Celtic year in pre-Christian times had only two seasons, winter and summer, and that the first days of November and May are still the Irish gale-days, the times when rents fall due.

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One may readily see how this came about, for these were the times when the stock was gathered and sorted, and dues were paid to the overlords in cattle. In the ordinary business of the fair exchange and barter gave way in time to money transactions, but one has only to visit a cattle fair to sense that the noisy ritual of assessing values and the prolonged bargaining have come down from a time before the use of money was general. The vigorous hand-slapping by which bargains are sealed in tight-lipped silence could derive from the days when different languages were spoken at the fairs. Apart from the difference between English and Gaelic it should be remembered that in many districts pockets of non-Gaelic speech, perhaps even of non-Aryan tongues, survived well into the Christian era. Another interesting accompaniment of the concluded bargain is the piece of money, the luck penny, which the seller hands back to the purchaser as a gesture of independence when a price has finally been agreed on. Many a fight has begun because a buyer has been dissatisfied with the amount of his luck money. Similar bargaining took place when a servant was being hired for the half year, and he received his earles or earnest money as a sign that the contract was concluded, handing over to his employer his bundle of clothes in return.

The countryman will find any excuse for going to the fair, and it is his proud boast that he has seen so many fairs. It is by the fairs, and not by the calendar, that he measures time and dates important events in the life of the community. 'Their whole thought seems to be going to fairs and selling or exchanging', it was written of the Mayo peasantry in 1836,[1] and in the seventeenth century we find this comment on 'the inferior rank of husbandmen' in Westmeath: '(they) are very crafty and subtile in all manner of bargaining, especially in their dealings in fairs and markets'.[2] Your luck at the fair might depend on the colour of the hair of the first person you met on the road, and it was unlucky to be passed on the way, so that horsemen riding at full gallop were not merely trying out their paces for the races which followed. For good luck you should carry with

[1] P. Knight, *Erris in the Irish Highlands*, 104.
[2] Sir Henry Piers, *West-Meath*, 115.

[i.e. the seasons and rent days dating from 1 May and 1 November. — Analyst]

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you some borrowed article made of steel, an old shoe should be thrown after you, and special charms recited. A knot should be tied in the tail of a horse which is to be sold. If a tinker takes a fancy to your horse you will be wise to sell, for 'he will take the good out of it whether or no'. And if you buy an animal you should put a handful of earth on its back to ensure that you have also purchased 'the luck of the beast'. It was at the fair that a man proved his adult status by his ability to hold his own at buying and selling, and a favourite theme of the stories which raise a ready laugh at the fireside concerns the simpleton who exchanged his cow for a worthless trifle.

The old countryman is not ashamed to try out, often with success, his age-old bargaining methods when making purchases of standard-priced goods at a shop. For the shop has taken over some of the traditions of the larger less personal world of the fair. Not only is a certain amount of haggling expected—and enjoyed on both sides of the counter—but there is a communal interest in the outcome. Thus it is held that you should never be alone when making a purchase. And there is an old belief that money earned in a particular way should be spent on some special purchase, for example there should be some 'egg money'—normally the woman's earnings—in the cash set aside to buy a horse in spring. Reference has already been made to the tradition that if you sell a hide you should buy something made of metal with the money. In parts of the country there were certain things which it was thought should never be sold though they might be given away—a kid for example. And in Mayo milk might be given away but would be sold only in secret, and it used to be an indelible disgrace for a woman to sell butter: it was regarded as a sign of abject poverty.[1]

It is perhaps because of the anonymity which the bustle of the fair confers on the buyer that certain classes of goods tend to be purchased there rather than at a shop. One of the remarkable features of an Irish fair is the quantities of old clothes and boots on display, and I am told that there is a considerable export of second-hand clothes from Scotland to the country fairs of Northern Ireland. Sir Walter Scott commented on this

[1]P. Knight, *Erris in the Irish Highlands*, 77; C. R. Browne, *Ballycroy*.

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trade in 1825.[1] Formerly it was at the fair that country folk purchased the specialized goods that could not be home-produced—edged tools, vessels of wood and metal, pieces of delph, and such colourful trivialities as beads and ribbons. The pole-lathe on which wooden vessels for the dairy were turned was known in early Christian times if not before, and a few examples are still in use. It seems probable that the turners once utilized a living branch as a spring-pole, like the bodgers of the Chilterns. At any rate we read of Co. Meath, early last century, that 'turners and wooden dish-makers generally build a hut in a wood that is being cut, and reside there while the timber is felling, buying and working those kind of trees most suited to their purpose and paying for them as the manufactured goods are sold'.[2] Today the turner selects and fells his own trees, preferably sycamore, and works them up in his own yard.

The churn-maker also had his stand at the fair, and there were the noggin-weavers and sieve-makers, the carvers of ladles, wooden spoons and butter prints (Fig. 88), and the makers of baskets and creels. Here also forgathered the beggars and ballad-singers, fiddlers, pedlars, gamesters, and the trouble-makers and the match-makers. It was a recognized practice for a bachelor to be on the look-out for a mate, or for a match-maker if things had gone far enough, and for the men of one parish to seek to settle old scores with enemies from another parish. There is some evidence that trial marriage contracts, binding for a year, were at one time an accompaniment of the fairs. Like the Scottish hand-fasting, the system allowed the husband to test the usefulness and fertility of the wife. Nor should we forget the games and horse-racing, and into the nineteenth century the cock-fighting and bull-baiting, which have long been associated with the great fairs.

Down to fairly recent times all the fairs were held on saints' days or at the movable feasts of Easter and Whitsun, and if the saint was a local one the fair, as at Kilorglin, was also a pattern, that is a festival associated with the patron saint. Unless the church has been able to keep a firm hold on the proceedings, these patterns have degenerated until many of

[1] See also De Latocnaye, *A Frenchman's Walk through Ireland, 1796–97*, 250.
[2] R. Thompson, *Statistical Survey of the County of Meath*, 253.